The Video Art of Takahiko Iimura
Daryl Chin

Film and Video, Anthology Film Archives), NY (1990)

Although video art as a specific medium(as distinct from broadcast television) has been in existence only since the 1960s, the changes in the technology since then have been enormous. Perhaps no other art form, not even cinema, has been so consistently in transition. From the initial period of black-and-white reel-to-reel portapaks, to the current period of differing formats(Betcams, VHS, Video8,etc.), video has maintained an ease of accessibility while developing in terms of technical sophistication. With the developments in technology, which have brought home technology to a level approaching broadcast quality, video art has become a form of artists' television. During the past five years, much of what is now considered video art is concerned with the discourse of television as a mass medium.

At this time, it is important to remember that the nature of video had been far more amorphous and far less defined in terms of television in the previous two decades. There were many variants in the approaches to video art. One was specifically technological, using computers and synthesizers as a means of manipulating imagery. Another was performative, using the immediacy of feedback to provide alternative perspectives. Another was sculptural, with video used as installation medium. The capacity of video to incorporate or to be incorporated by other media and other art forms was a feature that provided video with its great attraction for many artists.

Since the early 1960s, Takahiko Iimura has been one of the leading non-commercial film artists from Japan. By the early 1970s, his work in film had taken a specifically conceptual turn. Such film as Film Strips (1969), Film Strips II (1969), Counting, 1 to 100 or Xs (a part of Models, Reel 2, 1972), and 24 Frames Per Second (1978) were elegantly spare perceptual pieces, focusing on processes of counting, seeing and hearing as a means of investigating the consciousness of time and space. Counting, 1 to 100 or Xs, for example, are films in which frames are numbered, then variations occur in which some frames are "X"ed, some frames are not, some frames are numbered, some frames are not, and so on. The realization of continuity and the acute perception of the temporal dimension of that continuity make the films engrossing. Through the simplest means of numbering and marking of the frames, Iimura was able to emphasize the material conditions of the cinematic experience.

An important consideration to remember is that Iimura's conceptualism coincided with other film-makers engaged in similar endeavors. These film-makers often displayed a bias towards an approach which might be considered "anti-illusionist". In Iimura's case, his anti-illusionism was the occasion for a denial of imagism. What was striking about Iimura's work was his decision to work without the photographic image yet not to engage in animation. This emphasis on the conceptual nature of film, on qualities of temporal and continuity, would be used in his video work, which began in 1970.

By the mid-1970s, Iimura's interest in video had developed into a series of conceptual pieces focusing on the idea of syntactical arrangement. About this period, Iimura wrote:"During

the past few years I have studied the structural relationships of language and video using English as a base, although quite naturally I have always had Japanese in mind. Video is a unique system for applying this study of comparative linguistics. It is capable of recording image and sound simultaneously. In the closed circuit system (which is self-referential), a camera(observer) is fed back by the monitor (observed), so that the image not only refers to the object which is shot, but is also able to refer back to the subject-the observer who is shooting. This constitutes a sentence-like structure. In the languages too, what I am concerned with is not a word as object, but a sentence and its structure."1 Though seemingly simple, Iimura was using specific technical aspects of video (the simultaneous image-sound recording, the possibility of the close-circuit system, the lack of definition in portapak video image, etc.) for their immediate congruence as illustrations or concepts of structure, syntax, and indication.

In Camera, monitor, Frame (1976), the elements include a shot of a video camera with the number "1" on it, a shot of a video camera with the number "2" on it, a shot of a blank wall, a shot of Takahiko Iimura; accompanying these shots are the phrases "This is a camera" (on shots of camera "1" and "2"), "This is not a camera" (on shots of the blank wall), "I am Takahiko Iimura" (on shots of Iimura); obviously, the permutations of these shots with these comments provide the developing syntax of the video, with the negative of the statements as additional permutations. Thus: the blank wall is not just "not a camera", but is also "not Takahiko Iimura". The development of the closed circuit syntax is closed when Iimura stands behind one of the cameras, thus being able to declare (in terms of the image) "I am a camera". Camera, monitor, Frame, is one of a series of work that derived from the literal usage of language in terms of construction. As Iimura noted:"The tapes I made [in the]Observer/Observed, series (1975-76) are developed out of the basic pattern of 'I see you' with variations and more complicated sentences such as 'I see you (who is) shooting me' and 'I see myself (who is) shooting you.' These compound sentences are set up by two facing cameras and monitors which are fed back [to] each other, so that exact transfers of the sentences are possible and are made switchable according to the image; who is shooting whom."2 The feedback potential of video is underscored constantly: this is one feature which is specific to video, and Iimura is sensitive to discerning the differences between video and film.

Many of Iimura's early video installations continued his concerns with the congruence of language with perception in terms of video. One such installation was I=YOU=HE/SHE (1979), which involved the viewer in a closed circuit system whereby three views of the person were seen in continual patterns on three monitors. John C.Hanhardt wrote: "Taka Iimura's I=YOU=HE/SHE places language and the perceiver at the forefront. This video installation treats the live image and the delay of its presentation and completion as a discourse between the viewer and the medium. Ultimately, it is a dialogue with oneself, where the monitors is transformed into a mirror held up to the viewer. The distension of space and time, articulated in real and recorded time, refers to the time/space occupied by the viewer in the exhibition space."3 The continuity that is set up is predetermined in terms of the possibilities afforded by three cameras (offering views of front, back, and side) and three monitors, with a switcher to allow for the views to appear on different monitors. The continuity that develops from the initial situation of the viewer sitting in the chair at the center of the installation reflects the continual self-referential quality of Iimura's installations.

Engaging his concerns with the prospect of broadcast television, one of Iimura's most intriguing installations of the 1980s was TV FOR TV (Retitled TV Confrontation) (1983), in which two monitors, turned to different television stations, face each other. The Simplicity with which Iimura is able to pinpoint the cacophony of the commercial media culture is amusing and thought-provoking. In his videotape Self-Introduction (1982), Iimura used a two-camera set-up to videotape himself interviewing himself. Using a swivel chair, he was able to rotate left and right; the resulting images from the two cameras had the effect of mirror imagery. As the perspective swings from right to left and back again, Iimura uses a typical commercial format, the celebrity interview, and creates a subversion of that format with deadpan irony.

Although much of his video work has been involved in conceptual concerns often centering on linguistic possibilities, there has also been an imagistic, contemplative side, as exemplified in New York Hot springs (1984). In this videotape, there are ten images, shot in 10 different locations and at 10 different times, which show the city streets as transformed by the steam coming up from the manholes in the streets.

The contemplation of landscape is found in Moments at the Rock (1984), in which different views of a site are combined to affect a complex picture of a natural object. Here, the paradox of viewing becomes the difficulty of defining the object of contemplation. How to see the rock as different from the landscape is the question posed by this videotape.

Rene Magritte once posed a famous paradox in his drawing Ceci n'est pas une pipe (1926): the careful drawing of a pipe is, of course, not a pipe, but a drawing of a pipe. Similarly, in Double Portrait(1973-87), the viewer sees Takahiko and Akiko Iimura identifying themselves ("I am Taka Iimura"; "I am Akiko Iimura") and then negating those statements ("I am not Taka Iimura"; "I am not Akiko Iimura"). But the negation does not void the specifics of personality; rather, the negation calls into question the specifics of existence, for what the viewer is seeing is a video image of Takahiko Iimura, saying "I am Taka Iimura"; the viewer is not seeing the actual Takahiko Iimura, saying "I am Taka Iimura". Yet the medium of video is founded on its recorded immediacy, and, in this simple yet effective way, Iimura has penetrated the conditions of illusionism in the medium of the recorded image.

There is a spareness and a leanness to Iimura's work which is one of the reasons for the engaging quality of the work. Because the work is not inflated, the questions which are raised by the work seem to be quite natural. The "debate" between two television sets in TV Confrontation is so apt that the meanings of the installation do not seem to be forced: the viewer simply experiences the conditions of media overload, the insinuating quality of media to blend with the furniture in everyday living.

The quality of abstraction which distinguishes Iimura's work is often literary, that is, it often exists through the working out of a specific idea. Yet these ideas can have the force of the most seductive entertainments, because the narrative potential in the work often derives from the active participation of the viewer. This is made abundantly clear in such installation as I=YOU=HE/SHE. Barbara Cavaliere wrote:"You bring the piece to life. You choose to participate.You decide on the order by organizing how you see and hear about self. You select which of the three monitors you face and for how long, while the monitors automatically shift

from front to side to rear view of your transmitted self. You choose also from among the three sets of headphones, hearing a voice say repeatedly either 'I am,' 'You are,' or 'He is, She is.' Self is perceived simultaneously through the visible and the audible. Both points of view change continually, interpenetrating in various combinations, expanding consciousness of self through the timing and placement of the visual and verbal sequences created by your decision-in-process." 4 The engagement of the viewer can be seen in a videotaped documentation of a video installation P.S.1 in Long Island City. There, the viewers were confronted with the image of Takahiko Iimura stating some simple sentences. By trying to figure out the sequence of the statements, the viewers gradually succumb to the suspense of listening for what comes next.

In this way, Iimura's work, both in film and in video, has often engaged in what might be called the conditional tense. The direct participatory quality foregrounds a cognitive thematic. Yet there is nothing forbidding in Iimura's work. The British film-maker Malcolm Le Grice once referred to Iimura's work as using the most simple means and having a great elegance of concept. It is that elegance which defines the complexity of Iimura's work.

Iimura's ideas often originate in paradoxical formulations which he tries to take to logical conclusions. The philosophical bent of his work in video is obvious: it is for this reason that he has referred to Jacques Derrida as one of the inspirations for his work. Not only has Derrida, been an inspiration for the conceptual nature of Iimura's video work, but Talking to Myself:Phenomenological Operation (1978) uses a direct quote to generate the piece. Beyond that, the purpose of Iimura's work in video has been to attain a phenomenological awareness of the actual conditions of time and space. By forcing the viewer to confront the precise situation of that which is being viewed, the video work of Takahiko Iimura provides the genuine pleasure of knowledge. Engaging the mind in an active contemplation of the phenomenological conditions of seeing and hearing, Iimura's video work has gone from a consideration of the materiality of the process of video production and viewing, to a contemplation of the spaces in which we live. Even at his most austere, Iimura remains committed to unraveling the paradoxes in the very fact of existence. Using language as a starting point, Iimura has come to a point beyond language, trying to discern the phenomenology of the world around us.

1. Takahiko Iimura, "The Visuality in the Structure of the Japanese Language," Art & Cinema, December 1978.
2. Takahiko Iimura, "The Semiotics of Video," Asahi Shimbun, Tokyo, November 13, 1976.
3. John G. Handardt, Shigeko Kubota & Taka Iimura: New Video, Catalog, The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979.
4. Barbara Cavaliere, "Concepts in Performance," The Soho Weekly News, New York, June 28, 1979.